

Life's Essentials: A Developmental Approach

Prologue:

The essence of this essay is simple: each of us has to learn to stand on our own two feet and to have a sense of belonging to someone or something. Both agendas must be fulfilled within the context of daily life as we know it: its customs, its financial requirements, and its social structures. Thirdly, these two abilities- to function autonomously and to make rewarding affiliations- develop in the individual over time beginning in the first year of life and they are marked by development milestones. They are also complementary in that achievement of autonomous milestones make possible healthy and rewarding affiliations and vice versa.

My own understanding of these ideas is fundamentally informed by my own experience of a childhood that had ample parental emotional and material support. The task of achieving sufficient autonomy depends on the existence of both in this primary affiliation. Every family has its idiosyncrasies that are driven by the level of health of parental relationships along with the gender, individual habits, predispositions along with the number and the birth order of individuals within the family system. This complexity is then compounded by the power dynamics among the family members and the other sources of wisdom, nurture, and authority that have effect on the family system, such as care-givers, teachers, and extended family members. In sum, the journey to mature adulthood is challenging and no one gets a free pass, even in the most compassionate of homes.

The Early Years:

A child, as you and I were some years ago, is born entirely dependent on our primary affiliation: our parents and/or our other caregivers. I can cry out and suck in cooperation with those who hear my cries and who provide me sustenance, warmth, and cleanliness.

As time passes during which there is regular sharing of these rituals of connection, I slowly develop a sense of familiarity and love for these people, places, and things along with a sense of trust that there is a permanence and safety in the belonging to this assembly. These are my people!

Simultaneously, my awareness that I have some separate agendas from these caregivers also slowly develops. The word "no" is the beginning of this autonomy. "No, I do not want to be picked up or put down". "No, I do not want to suck any more or be left with a discomfort in my tummy". This "no" should not be thought of as a negation of anything or anyone, but rather the first inklings that I aspire to a separate identity: my "me".

Eventually, this separate self learns to master skills that bring joy to me and hopefully to the people I belong to. Starting with such things as eye contact and sitting up, which bring universal delight, there are other activities driven by my curiosities that can bring displeasure to people who wish to protect me, let alone wishing that I sleep through the night, be quiet, and not question parental authority.

